

## The Ecclesial Situation in Ukraine after the *Tomos* of Autocephaly

The religious situation in Ukraine, overtly tense since the early 1990's, has entered an extremely interesting stage, part of a three-vectored issue that involves Constantinople, Moscow, and Kyiv. The Russian Orthodox Church has often been a tool of the Russian state, whether in the hands of the tsars, the commissars, or the new, bare-chested star of the Kremlin. After the fall of the USSR and the ideological vacuum that this created in Russia, this Church was again pulled into an intimate relationship with the Kremlin, especially under Vladimir Putin, to offer a conservative and nationalist vision known as “Russkiy Mir:” in English, the “Russian World.”<sup>1</sup>

The contrast with Ukraine is stark. From its independence in 1991 until now, no Orthodox Church in Ukraine has had as cozy a relationship with the government as is the case in Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, those Orthodox Christians who did not want to remain members of the Moscow Patriarchate were not limited in their freedom by the Ukrainian government, and were able to organize their Church life as they saw fit. At the same time, the Moscow Patriarchate's affiliate in Ukraine continued to function freely. In 1990 this body, the “Ukrainian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church,” was hastily renamed the “Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” as Moscow bestowed on it a hitherto unheard-of and overtly ambiguous status, unlike that of any other Orthodox Church, calling it “independent,” but studiously avoiding the accepted ecclesiastical terms “autocephalous” or “autonomous.”<sup>2</sup> Within just a few years Orthodox Christianity in

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<sup>1</sup> Igor Zevelev, “The Russian World in Moscow's Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 22, 2016, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-world-moscows-strategy>.

<sup>2</sup> Anatoliy Babynskyi, “The Complexity and Duplicity of Deciphering the New Ukrainian Law on Religion,” *Public Orthodoxy* (blog), *The Orthodox*

Ukraine had split into three major factions: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). Moscow has labeled the latter two groups schismatic and devoid of grace, and, following Moscow's lead, the rest of the Orthodox world treated these Churches as illegitimate and refused communion with them. The UOC-MP thus considers itself to be "the only canonical Church" in Ukraine, and prefers to call itself simply "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church," without qualifiers.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to determining the membership of these different bodies, the casual observer is easily confused by the fact that the UOC-MP always counts parishes, monasteries and other institutions; according to such statistics it appears to be the largest Church in the country.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the UOC-KP tends to count members or percentages of the population; according to this method of calculation, it constitutes the largest Church in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> The UAOC, meanwhile, is much smaller than these two ecclesiastical institutions; in a 2004 poll, only about 7% of Ukrainians who

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*Christian Studies Center of Fordham University*, February 13, 2017, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/tag/russian-orthodox-church/>. In contrast to the ambiguous canonical status of the UOC-MP, in 1970 the Moscow Patriarchate unambiguously bestowed autocephaly (the highest level of ecclesial self-rule) on the Orthodox Church in America. On the ambiguous canonical status of the UOC-MP, and the emergence of the UAOC and the UOC-KP, see Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), 161–208.

<sup>3</sup> "Metropolitan Onufry on the Fate of Canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine," The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, October 24, 2018, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://mospat.ru/en/2018/10/24/news165687/>.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Zanemonets, "Resolving Ukraine's Orthodox Church Crisis," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 25, 2018, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77329>.

<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Davis, "Hard Data on Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 20, no. 6 (December 2000): 25, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1699&context=ree>.